DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 166 230 TL 008 210

AUTHOR Porter, John W.
TITLE Seminar on Competency-Based Education. A Position Paper on the Problems and Promises of Competency-Based Education.
PUB DATE 17 Jul 78
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Seminar on Competency-Based Education (sponsored by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, July 17-18, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Standards; Basic Skills; *Educational Needs; *Educational Problems; *Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; Mastery Learning; *Minimum Competency Testing; *Performance Based Education; School Role; State Programs
IDENTIFIERS Michigan; Michigan Educational Assessment Program

ABSTRACT

The most important aspect of competency-based education is clearly linked to Bloom's mastery learning model: the establishment of behaviors which ought to be learned and adequately performed by public school students. The main components of competency based education are: (1) establishment of student standards; (2) student testing; and (3) professional development of school staff. These components have been a part of Michigan's competency based program for several years. Competency based education is difficult to institutionalize because school personnel are not trained to provide it; because discrepancies exist between parents' and teachers' expectations of students, textbooks used, tests used, and report cards used. Societal and technological changes in the United States, as well as an interest in equality and in effective use of taxes in support of education, have led to a changing role for today's schools. National policy no longer supports the idea that schools should screen, sort, and select students. Competency based education offers the potential to provide equality, equity and excellence in education, because it supports individualized instruction, emphasis on results, parent involvement, cohesive teacher education, and linking between schooling and employment. (GDC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED166230

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

SEMINAR ON COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

Sponsored by the
National Association of Elemenatry School Principals
and the
Charles F. Kettering Foundation

by
John W. Porter

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

John Porter

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

A Position Paper on the Problems and Promises of Competency-Based Education

July 17-18, 1978

TM008 210

In some respects the May, 1978 issue of Phi Delta Kappan further confuses the issue regarding Competency-Based Education. The lead article, for example, begins with a statement that "...it has taken less than three years for the minimum competency movement to sweep the United States. Thirty-three states have mandated specific standards for advancement in or graduation from their public schools."

In Michigan, we have been engaged in the development and implementation of a comprehensive minimum Competency-Based Program since 1969, becoming the first state to authorize statewide criterion referenced test in 1972.

It is true there has been a rash of newspaper and television stories of recent regarding the Florida program and the Chicago summer school effort for eighth graders, but this is not a movement that has been confined to the last three years. In fact, "mastery learning" as conceptualized and researched by Benjamin Bloom and others has been under scrutiny for many years. For this reason, the debate should not be around the issue of minimum competency testing.

In our haste to establish a debatable topic around testing, we have unwittingly overlooked the most important aspect of the movement, that being the establishing of <u>what ought to be learned in public school and adequately performed by elementary and secondary students</u>. This is more clearly linked to Benjamin Bloom's "mastery learning." Happily, both the literature and the research are richer in the area of "mastery learning" than in that of minimal competency testing. However, because "Competency-Based Education" is the term currently in vogue, I will use it.

The movement toward Competency-Based Education cannot be appropriately understood outside of the context in which it is currently being promoted. It is a response to the feeling that many students are graduating from high school without the requisite skills either for achieving success in college or for securing and keeping an appropriate job. It is a reaction to the sudden discovery that scores on college entrance examinations have been declining. It is a response to a feeling that youth are growing up to be undisciplined, unconcerned, and indifferent to their social obligations. The movement has gained far more political and media support than either parental or professional support. Politicians in many places have hurried to get on the bandwagon, hoping that Competency-Based Education will produce the educational utopia the public is seeking.

Educators, on the whole, have been divided, primarily because, for the most part, they have been wary of too simplistic a solution to complex personal, psychological, and social problems affecting children and youth. As a result, no clear leadership will emerge from the educational community, leaving as has been characteristic of the past those outside the educational field to set the agenda.

Since we, as educators, are far from agreement as to the "Basics," the articles will continue to flow about "this new knee jerk reaction," "another case of hyper-rationalization," "a comedy farce," and etc.

Although there has been a series of discussion sessions, no national educational leadership has emerged to address the problems which have generated the proliferating fads of the 70's. One of the difficulties in the educational field is the adversary relationship that collective bargaining and accelerating cost have created between teacher groups and school boards in the diverse setting of school districts.

Another difficulty is the decentralized nature of American Education, with textbook publishers and testing companies wielding great influence on what transpires in a given school year by the materials purchased in each of the 16,000 school districts.

It's not likely that the educational enterprise can embrace equality of educational opportunity, collective bargaining, declining enrollments, and accelerating inflation plus demands for property tax reduction without facing up to some significant and major alterations in the existing process. Competency-Based Education is an outgrowth of this dilemma.

This position paper has been prepared based upon ten years of personal experience in attempting to reach a satisfactory solution to this basic problem.

Competency-Based Education. Is it another education fad or is it a movement with substance and regenerating inertia.

Competency-Based Education could become a permanent part of the schooling process, but how it is implemented and whether it ignites enthusiasm as a uniform procedure will determine whether it indeed results in having a significant impact upon the nations schools.

There are three basic components of Competency-Based Education.

The first component is the establishing of what some call Competency Standards. In Michigan, we have called them Student Expectations. Few schools across the nation have established measurable student expectations, which is the first necessary step to Competency-Based Education.

The second component is the establishing of what some call Competency Tests. In Michigan, we call them Student Assessment Tests. Few schools across the nation have established criterion-referenced student assessment tests, which is the second necessary step to Competency-Based Education.

The third component is the establishing of what some call Professional Development of School Staff. Few schools across the country have the resources

or have set the priority to retrain staff along with making needed curriculum changes. In Michigan, we have begun this process through State-funded Professional Development Centers, "GESTALT," and Delivery Systems Analysis.

In Michigan, we have had these components of Competency-Based Education for reading and math for eight years, and although we are well along to infusing this new process into the school curriculum the struggle is a never ending one. Without the dedication and support of the Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principal's Association the program would have turned to a fad years ago.

There are very legitimate reasons why Competency-Based Education will be difficult to institutionalize.

First, and the most obvious is that most of today's school personnel have not been prepared in our Colleges of Education to provide instruction on a Competency-Based Education basis.

Second, and although not as obvious at first but of far greater importance is the fact that by and large there exist little, if any, relationship (1) between what parents and teachers expect of each student, and (2) the kinds of textbooks schools purchased, and (3) the kinds of standardized test used and (4) the locally developed report cards sent home to parents.

In other words, unless we develop a relationship between these four basic pillars of the schooling process, it will do little in terms of impact to retrain school staffs.

One might ask how did the situation ever develop in the first place? The answer is that public schools were created to screen, sort, and select out the most talented for higher learning and those who couldn't or did not wish to pursue higher learning could stay on the farms to earn a living.

The system was bolstered in the 1920's by the development of the proverbial normal distribution curve, the ultimate in carrying out the sanctioned

national policy of screening, sorting, and selecting. It was not until 1954, 178 years after independence, that the nation was called to task in this regard.

Since 1969, I have been urging that the nation continue its move away from the process of screening, sorting, and selecting to a new system of equality, equity, and excellence.

Competency-Based Education has become the vehicle by which I believe this shift can be ultimately fulfilled.

However, there is missing that set of uniform ingredients that made the current system so effective and enduring.

Unless those ingredients are identified and as of this writing it or they have not, it is unlikely that Competency-Based Education will endure against the existing overwhelming odds.

The odds are:

1. Schooling is currently based upon school time rather than student needs.

2. Schooling currently is labor-intensified thus improvements are costly and indirect.

3. Schooling currently is not related to real-world happenings and even the colleges have lowered their standards of admissions.

4. Schooling currently is process oriented rather than product oriented making it difficult to establish acceptable standards.

5. Schooling currently has no formal agreements with business and industry regarding its value for inclusion into the world of work.

6. Schooling currently is highly decentralized with each of some 16,000 school boards and committees determining the major policy directions, with principals and teachers establishing the specific quality controls that vary among some 50,000 buildings.

Yes, there will be tough times, but they need not be traumatic. We should look at this as an opportunity to test our own abilities and skills, to demonstrate that schooling does indeed make a difference. I believe we are on the crest of an

educational breakthrough unprecedented in this century, and we need not drown in waves of self-pity.

II.

Times have changed dramatically since the second half of the twentieth century, and the technological and social changes demand, in my opinion, immediate changes in the schooling process.

Prior to 1950, an elementary or secondary student, and I was one, participated in the schooling process without the provision of anyone of the following ten events which are taken for granted today:

... There were no commercial televisions before 1950.

... There were no commercial jet airliners.

... There were no shopping malls.

... There were no expressways.

... There were no computers.

... There were no credit cards.

... There were no Holiday Inns.

... There was no frozen food processing.

... There were no transistor radios and, believe it or not,

... there were no McDonald Hamburger Stands.

In addition to these technological changes there have been several social changes with far-reaching implications.

1. The 1954 U. S. Supreme Court Desegregation Decision.
2. The 1964 Civil Rights Act.
3. The 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act.
4. The emergence of Collective Bargaining in 1966.
5. The Age of Majority in 1972 which lowered the adult age from 21 to 18.
6. The 1973 Federal intervention in regard to Equity for Women and Education for the Handicapped.

These six social changes were sanctioned without at least one of the four fundamental tenets for which the schools were established being altered. To date we, as a nation, have not ratified any new basic tenets for the schools.

These tenets are:

1. We assumed for two hundred years that the operation of our public schools would be relatively inexpensive! This is no longer the case.

2. We assumed for two hundred years that our public schools should screen, sort, and select! This they can no longer do.

3. We assumed for two hundred years that those who own the real property or have high incomes---people who pay the taxes--- would also bear the children! This has become just the opposite.

4. We assumed for two hundred years that the so-called "have-nots" would not want to actively participate in the dreams, goals, and aspirations of this nation!

These events in the past quarter of a century have significantly changed the role of the schools...

First, by increasing the variance between schooling and education.

Second, by shifting the purpose of schooling from an end in and of itself to a means to an end.

Third, by setting a climate for Educational Accountability, an outgrowth being Competency-Based Education.

Fourth, by limiting the impact of the teacher while at the same time demanding that more be educated.

Thus, within three score years technological, social, political, and economic changes have all focused upon the schooling process, probably because the public schools are the only uniform social institution financed through tax dollars to provide services without clear cost-benefits.

III.

Since 1969, we in Michigan have been concerned about the trends, and therefore the Department of Education initiated a statewide Competency-Based

Education program that has resulted in the adoption of over 40 new laws, regulations, court opinions and policies.

The program has brought into being the identification of the 10 component elements of Student Expectations for the elementary and middle school levels.

The program has brought into being the identification of the four component elements of Student Expectations for the senior high school level.

Student Assessment Tests have been developed to measure unmet student needs in each of the components that have been established since 1969.

Every student is expected to be assessed every three years at levels 1, 4, 7, and 10. All students are expected to take a state or local life-role competency test between grade 10 and graduation. In addition, many school districts are developing their own high school graduation examinations.

In the other eight components at the elementary and middle school levels, students will be assessed on a sampling basis unless a school system voluntarily requests every pupil testing in one of the other areas. All tests are geared for the preprimary, elementary, junior high school, and senior high school terminal points.

The state Life Role Competencies Test may not reflect local curricula. For this reason the state does not propose that the state Life Role Competency Test be used to determine who should get a high school diploma. The role of the state is to determine if student needs are being adequately met. The role of the local district may be to set standards for student evaluation.

We earnestly believe we have in place the essential ingredients of a major improvement and reform package for the elementary and secondary schools of the state. This package consists of specific, focused activities which should be

carried out in a cooperative state and local effort. The need for state and local cooperation, with assistance from colleges and universities, is critical to advances in education.

There are ten activities that need to be internalized by each teacher and in each building if the needs of individual students are to be met in the name of individual excellence. These ten activities are:

1. Schools should be required to set forth written student expectations.
2. Schools should request by invitation that parents attend an opening convocation in the Fall.
3. Schools should conduct a student needs assessment.
4. Schools should prepare an Individualized Education Plan on each student.
5. Schools should show a relationship between expectations, textbooks, tests, and report cards.
6. Schools should engage in retraining staffs.
7. Schools should make it necessary for parents to pick-up report cards quarterly and send a report home every three weeks.
8. Schools should offer parents, on a free and voluntary basis, an opportunity for their children who do not reach acceptable levels at the end of June a chance to attend a summer enrichment program.
9. Schools should report to the public on success and failure of the school year endeavors.
10. Schools should submit recommendations for improvements.

Most of these ten activities currently do not exist in our schools, and only through continued state leadership and local encouragement will they gradually come into being. While this is taking place, slowly but surely, there is need to develop a sort of Chronological Record of Student Progress for Parents. Such a chronology currently does not exist.

Although the Michigan Educational Assessment Program stands out as the most controversial of the various components of our program, it is, except for the fear of teachers to be evaluated, the most objective aspects of the various components.

The major issue in Michigan is whether the controversy over MEAP will explode into an all-out confrontation, before teachers and others can be retrained to function effectively in a Competency-Based Education setting. There are clear promises offered by Competency-Based Education, but to a profession under seige the promises may not provide enough assurances to overcome the obvious problems that will result from adopting such a change in focus. I shall highlight the promises and problems next in an effort to lay out the magnitude of the dilemma.

IV.

First, I have identified the components on Competency-Based Education.

Then, I explained why technological, social, political, and economic changes of the past twenty-five years have fostered Competency-Based Education.

Then, I outlined the basic features of the Michigan Competency-Based Education program which is the oldest in the nation.

Finally, I wish to zero in on the problems and particularly the promises of Competency-Based Education from my point of view.

There are, as I have noted earlier, a number of problems related to Competency-Based Education.

First, if improperly and hastily set up it could be detrimental to the progress of high and low achieving students.

Second, if utilized as a graduation standard, it could result in a disproportionate number of students opting for other less favorable alternatives.

Third, if poorly explained, it could be used as an evaluation of teacher-school effectiveness, and such comparisons could lead to even greater staff insecurity.

Fourth, if a plan of action is lacking, the results of such a program could lead to tracking students.

Fifth, if "Acceptable Levels" are established as low minimums, attainment by too many students could place the program in the position of being a farce.

Sixth, if every school district and state heads off, in the name of Competency-Based Education, in differing directions as is now the case, the results will be its demise.

However, there is an equal number of potential promises for Competency-Based Education. First, a universally acceptable set of goals and objectives must emerge. I am hopeful that this will be the case. Next, we need a cadre of national educational leaders to fulfill the promise Competency-Based Education offers.

First, Competency-Based Education has the promise of truly individualizing instruction to respond to individual student needs.

Second, Competency-Based Education has the promise of bringing about cohesiveness in the teacher-training and schooling process, something long overdue.

Third, Competency-Based Education offers the best hope of distinguishing between what I have called the "Intentional School Learnings" and the "Incidental Social Learnings." In this regard, it is interesting to note that in any nearly 9000 hours of living, the school year engages the student in a maximum of 900 hours, or only one/tenth of the time.

Fourth, Competency-Based Education has the potential of shifting the priorities of schooling from process to product or resources to results.

Because schools were established to be inexpensive extensions of the training in the home, little attention was ever devoted to the cost of instruction until very recently. The school was created for one purpose and today it is being asked to perform a different purpose.

Fifth, Competency-Based Education holds out the promise of bringing parents back into the schooling process, and assuring taxpayers that the schools can indeed make a difference.

Sixth, Competency-Based Education provides a possible means of linking education and employment, something badly needed today.

In summary, I have stipulated that the evidence is overwhelming in that technological changes, societal conditions, political considerations and economics cry out for major changes in schooling. The concept of Competency-Based Education as we define it in Michigan is a means of keeping pace with the accelerating changes of the 1970's and '80's.

We believe Competency-Based Education is a means of providing each student with an educational health check, a temperature reading on how well each student is doing.

I have also noted that this movement lacks the internal support mechanisms necessary to off-set the opposition that has and will continue to emerge.

Finally, I have noted that for the movement to succeed it must not only offer Equality and Equity which I believe it can achieve reasonably well, but more importantly it must assure Excellence.

In other words, whatever emerges to complement the screening, sorting, and selecting process of the past and present must address the issue of Excellence for the gifted and talented student, the regular student, the bilingual student, the handicapped student, the academically deficient student, and a host of other students who are seeking to profit from the schooling process.

This challenge may well be too great to consider as politically feasible, but the country has within these past 25 years clearly started down the road toward equality and equity. To be stymied at this juncture would be to turn a very good system that screened, sorted and selected into a mediocre system of equality and equity.

Excellence must, therefore, become the single most important goal in the Competency-Based Education movement if its promises are to overshadow its problems.